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Opening extract from

Finale

Written by

Becca Fitzpatrick

Published by

Simon & Schuster Ltd

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I’m not a party girl. The ear-splitting music, the gyrating bodies, the inebriated smiles - not my thing. My ideal Saturday night would be at home, snuggling on the sofa and watching a rom-com with my boyfriend, Patch. Predictable, low-key . . . *normal*. My name is Nora Grey and, while I used to be an average American teen, buying my clothes at the J. Crew outlet and spending my babysitting money on iTunes, normal and I have recently become perfect strangers. As in, I wouldn’t know normal if it marched up and poked me in the eye.

Normal and I parted ways when Patch strolled into my life. Patch has seven inches on me, operates on cold, hard logic, moves like smoke, and lives alone in a super-secret, super-swanky studio beneath Delphic Amusement Park. The sound of his voice, low and sexy, can melt my heart in three seconds flat. He’s also a fallen angel, kicked out of heaven for his flexibility when it comes to following rules. I personally believe Patch scared the pants off *normal*, and it took off running for the far side of the world.

I might not have normality, but I do have stability. Namely in the form of my best friend of twelve years, Vee Sky. Vee and I have an unshakeable bond that even a laundry list of differences can’t break. They say opposites attract, and Vee and I are proof of that. I am slender and tall—for a human—with big curly hair that tests my patience, and a Type A personality. Vee is even taller, with ash-blonde hair, green eyes, and more curves than a rollercoaster track. Almost always, Vee’s wishes trump mine. And, unlike me, Vee *lives* for a good party.

Tonight Vee’s wish to seek out a good party took us across town to a four-storey brick warehouse throbbing with club music, swimming with fake IDs, and jam-packed with bodies producing enough sweat to take greenhouse gases to a whole new level. The

layout inside was standard: a dance floor sandwiched between a stage and a bar. Rumour had it that a secret door behind the bar led to the basement, and the basement led to a man named Storky, who operated a thriving pirated *anything* business. Community religious leaders kept threatening to board up Coldwater's hotbed of iniquity for disorderly teens . . . also known as the Devil's Handbag.

"Groove it, baby," Vee yelled at me over the mindless *thump, thump, thump* of music, lacing her fingers through mine and swaying our hands over our heads. We were at the centre of the dance floor, being jostled and bumped on every side. "This is how Saturday night's supposed to be. You and me gettin' down, letting loose, working up good ol'-fashioned girl-sweat."

I did my best to give an enthusiastic nod, but the guy behind me kept stepping on the heel of my ballet flat, and at five-second intervals, I had to shove my foot back into it. The girl to my right was dancing with her elbows out and, if I wasn't careful, I knew I'd get clipped in the shoulder.

"Maybe we should go get drinks," I called to Vee. "It feels like Florida in here."

"That's 'cause you and me are burning up this place. Check out the guy at the bar. He can't take his eyes off your smokin' moves." She licked her finger and pressed it to my bare shoulder, making a sizzling sound.

I followed her gaze . . . and my heart lurched.

Dante Matterazzi lifted his chin in acknowledgement. His next gesture was a little more subtle.

Wouldn't have pegged you for a dancer, he spoke to my mind.

Funny, I would *have pegged you for a stalker,* I shot back.

Dante Matterazzi and I both belonged to the Nephilim race, hence our innate ability to mind-speak, but the similarities stopped there. Dante didn't know how to give it a rest, and I didn't know how much longer I could dodge him. I'd met him for the first time just this morning, but he was acting like our relationship had banked several years, at the very least.

I left a message on your cell phone, he said.

Gee, I must have missed it. More like I deleted it.

We need to talk.

I'm kind of busy. To emphasise my point, I rolled my hips and swung my arms side to side, doing my best to imitate Vee, whose favourite television network was BET, and it showed. She had hip-hop stamped on her soul.

A faint smile quirked Dante's mouth. *While you're at it, get your friend to give you some pointers. You're floundering. Definite fish-out-of-water material. Meet me out back in two.*

I glared at him. *Busy, remember?*

This can't wait. With a meaningful arch of his eyebrows, he disappeared into the crowd.

"His loss," Vee said. "He can't handle the heat."

"About those drinks," I said. "Can I bring you a Coke?" Vee didn't look ready to give up dancing anytime soon, and as much as I wanted to avoid Dante, I figured it was best to just get this over with. Suck it up and talk to him. The alternative was having him shadow me all night.

“Coke with lime,” Vee said.

I edged my way off the dance floor and, after making sure Vee wasn’t watching me, ducked down a side hallway and out the back door. The alley was bathed in blue moonlight. A red Porsche Panamera was parked in front of me, and Dante leaned against it, arms folded loosely over his chest.

Dante is six feet nine with the physique of a soldier fresh out of boot camp. Case in point: he has more muscle tone in his neck than I have in my entire body. Tonight he was wearing baggy khakis and a white linen shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest, revealing a deep V of smooth, hairless skin. Show-off.

“Nice car,” I said.

“It gets the job done.”

“So does my Volkswagen, and it cost considerably less.”

“Takes more than four wheels to be a car.”

Ugh.

“So,” I said, tapping my foot. “What’s so urgent?”

“You still dating that fallen angel?”

It was only the third time in as many hours that he’d asked. Twice by text message, and now face-to-face. My relationship with Patch had gone through a lot of ups and downs, but the current trend was upward. We weren’t without our issues, however. In a world where Nephilim and fallen angels would rather die than smile at each other, dating a fallen angel was a definite no-no.

I stood a little taller and said, “You know it.”

“Being careful?”

“Discreet is the watchword.” Patch and I didn’t need Dante to tell us it was wise not to make a lot of public appearances together. Nephilim and fallen angels never needed an excuse to teach each other a lesson, and racial tensions between the two groups were getting hotter with each passing day. It was autumn, October to be exact, and the Jewish month of Cheshvan was just days away.

Every year during Cheshvan fallen angels possess Nephilim bodies by the droves. Fallen angels have free rein to do as they please and, since it’s the only time during the year they can actually feel physical sensation, their creativity knows no bounds. They chase after pleasure, pain, and everything in between, playing parasites to their Nephilim hosts. For Nephilim, Cheshvan is a hellish prison.

If Patch and I were so much as seen holding hands by the wrong individuals, we’d pay, one way or another.

“Let’s talk about your image,” Dante said. “We need to generate some positive media around your name. Boost Nephilim confidence in you.”

I gave a theatrical snap of my fingers. “Don’t you just hate it when your approval ratings are low?”

Dante frowned. “This isn’t a joke, Nora. Cheshvan starts in just over seventy-two hours, and that means war. Fallen angels on one side, us on the other. Everything rides on your shoulders - you’re the leader of the Nephilim army.”

Queasiness pinched my stomach. I hadn’t exactly applied for the job. Thanks to my deceased father, a truly twisted man, I’d been forced to inherit the position. I’d sworn a blood oath to lead his army, and failure to do so would result in my death, and the death of my mom. No pressure.

“Despite our cautious measures, there are rumours you’re dating a fallen angel, and that your loyalties are split.”

“I *am* dating a fallen angel.”

Dante rolled his eyes. “Think you could say it any louder?”

I shrugged. *If that’s what you really want.* Then I opened my mouth, but Dante was beside me in an instant, covering it. “I know it kills you, but could you make my job easy just this once?” he murmured in my ear, glancing around at the shadows with obvious uneasiness, even though I was positive we were alone. I’d only been a purebred Nephilim for twenty-four hours, but I trusted my new, sharper sixth sense. If there were eavesdroppers lurking around, I’d know.

“What did you have in mind?” I asked when he lowered his hand.

“Date Scott Parnell.”

Scott Parnell was the first Nephilim I’d ever befriended, at the tender age of five. I hadn’t known a thing about his true heritage back then, but in recent months he’d taken on the roles of first my tormentor, then my partner in crime, and eventually my friend. There were no secrets between us. Likewise, there was no romantic chemistry.

I laughed. “You’re killing me, Dante.”

“It would be for show. For the sake of appearances,” he explained. “Just until our race warms to you. You’ve only been Nephilim one measly day. Nobody knows you. People need a reason to like you. We have to make them feel comfortable trusting you.”

“I can’t date Scott,” I told Dante. “Vee likes him.”

To say Vee had been unlucky in love was putting it optimistically. In the past six months she’d fallen for a narcissistic predator and a back-stabbing slimeball. Not

surprisingly, both relationships made her seriously doubt her instincts in love. She had unequivocally refused to so much as smile at the opposite sex . . . until Scott came along. Early last night, just hours before my father had coerced me into transforming myself into a purebred Nephil so I could take over his army, Vee and I had come to the Devil's Handbag to watch Scott play bass for his new band, Serpentine, and she hadn't stopped talking about him. To sweep in and steal Scott now, even if it was a ruse, would be the ultimate low blow.

"It wouldn't be real," Dante repeated, as if that made everything just peachy.

"Would Vee know that?"

"Not exactly. You and Scott would have to be convincing. A leak would be disastrous, so I'd want to limit the truth to the three of us."

I did the hands-on-hips thing, going for firm and immovable. "Then you're going to have to come up with someone else." I wasn't enamoured with the idea of fake-dating a Nephil to boost my popularity. In fact it seemed like a disaster in the making, but I wanted this mess behind me. If Dante thought a Nephilim boyfriend would give me more credence, so be it. It wouldn't be real. Obviously Patch wouldn't be thrilled, but tackle one problem at a time, right?

Dante's mouth compressed into a line, and he shut his eyes briefly. Summoning patience.

"He'd need to be respected in the Nephilim community," Dante said thoughtfully at last. "Someone Nephilim could picture their leader with."

I made an impatient gesture. "Fine. Just throw someone other than Scott at me."

"Me."

I flinched. “Sorry. What? *You?*” I was too stunned to burst into laughter.

“Why not?” Dante asked.

“Do you really want me to start listing reasons? Because I’ll keep you here all night. For starters, you already have a girlfriend - what’s her name again? Melinda? Marianne?”

“Marina.”

I made a *whatever* gesture. “You’re also at least five years older than me in human years - total scandal fodder - you don’t have a sense of humour, and - oh yeah. *We can’t stand each other*.”

“I’m your first lieutenant—”

“Because my douche bag of a biological father gave you the position. I had no say in it.”

Dante didn’t seem to hear me. “We met and felt an instant connection. It’s a believable story.” He smiled. “Lots of good publicity.”

“If you say the *P* word one more time, I’m going to . . . do something drastic.” Like smack him. And then smack myself for even considering this plan.

“Sleep on it,” Dante said. “Think it over.”

“Thinking about it.” I counted to three on my fingers. “Okay, done. Bad idea. Really bad idea. My answer is no.”

“You have a better idea?”

“Yes, but I’ll need some time to think it up.”

“Sure. No problem, Nora.” He counted to three on his fingers. “Okay, time’s up. I needed a name first thing this morning. In case it wasn’t painfully obvious, your image is going down the tank. Word of your father’s death, and subsequently your new leadership

position, is spreading like wildfire. People are talking, and the talk isn't good. We need Nephilim to believe in you. We need them to trust that you have their best interests in mind, and that you can finish your father's work and bring us out of bondage from fallen angels three days from now. We need them to rally behind you, and we're going to give them one good reason after another. Starting with a respected Nephilim boyfriend."

"Hey, babe, everything okay back here?"

Dante and I swung around. Vee stood in the doorway, eyeing us with equal parts wariness and curiosity.

"Hey! Everything's fine," I said, a little too enthusiastically.

"You never came back with our drinks, and I started to worry," Vee said. Her gaze shifted from me to Dante. Recognition sparked in her eyes, and I knew she remembered him from the bar. "Who are you?" she asked him.

"Him?" I cut in. "Oh. Uh. Well, he's just some random guy—"

Dante stepped forward, hand extended. "Dante Matterazzi. I'm a friend of Nora's. We met a few days ago when our mutual acquaintance, Scott Parnell, introduced us."

Just like that, Vee's face lit up. "You know Scott?"

"Good friend of mine, actually."

"Any friend of Scott's is a friend of mine."

Inwardly, I gouged my eyes out.

"So what are you two doing back here?" Vee asked us.

"Dante just picked out a new car," I said, stepping aside to give her an unobstructed view of the Porsche. "He couldn't resist showing it off. Don't look too closely, though. I think the VIN number is missing. Dante had to resort to theft, since he used up all his

money getting his chest waxed this morning, and, boy, does it gleam."

"Funny," Dante said. I thought maybe he'd fasten at least one more shirt button, but he didn't.

"If I had a car like that, I'd show it off too," Vee said.

Dante said, "I tried talking Nora into a ride, but she keeps brushing me off."

"That's because she has a hard-A boyfriend. He must have been home schooled, because he missed all those valuable lessons we learned in kindergarten, like sharing. He finds out you took Nora for a ride, he'll wrap this shiny new Porsche around the nearest tree."

"Gee," I said, "look at the time. Don't you have somewhere to be, Dante?"

"Turns out my night's open." He smiled, slow and easy, and I knew he was relishing every moment of intruding on my private life. I'd made it clear that any contact between us had to be in private, and he was showing me what he thought of my "rules". In a lame attempt at evening the score, I glared my meanest, coldest look at him.

"You're in luck," Vee said. "We know just the thing to fill up your night. You're gonna hang out with two of the coolest girls in all of Coldwater, Mr Dante Matterazzi."

"Dante doesn't dance," I quickly interjected.

"I'll make an exception, just this once," he answered, opening the door for us.

Vee clapped her hands, jumping up and down. "I just *knew* this night was gonna rock!" she squealed, ducking under Dante's arm.

"After you," Dante said, placing his palm on the small of my back and guiding me inside. I batted his hand away but, to my aggravation, he leaned close and murmured, "Glad we had this little chat."

We haven't resolved anything, I spoke to his mind. *This whole boyfriend-girlfriend thing? Nothing is settled. Just a little something to bear in mind. And, for the record, my best friend isn't supposed to know you exist.*

Your best friend thinks I should give your boyfriend a run for his money, he said, sounding amused.

She thinks anything with a beating heart should replace him. They have unresolved issues.

Sounds promising.

He followed me down the short hall leading to the dance floor, and I felt his haughty, goading smile the whole way. *You're outnumbered, Nora. Just a little something to bear in mind.*

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The loud monotone beat of the music drove into my skull like a hammer. I pinched the bridge of my nose, cringing against a swelling headache. I had one elbow perched on the bar, and I used my free hand to press a glass of ice water against my forehead.

"Tired already?" Dante asked, leaving Vee on the dance floor to slide onto a bar stool beside me.

"Any idea how much longer she's going to last?" I asked.

"Looks to me like she's caught her second wind."

"Next time I'm in the market for a best friend, remind me to shy away from the Energizer Bunny. She keeps going and going.. ."

"You look like you could use a ride home."

I shook my head. "I drove, but I can't leave Vee here. Seriously, how much longer can she possibly last?" Of course, I'd been asking myself the same question for the past

hour.

“Tell you what. Go home. I’ll stay with Vee. When she finally drops, I’ll give her a ride back to her place.”

“I thought you weren’t supposed to get mixed up in my personal life?” I tried to sound surly, but I was exhausted and the conviction just wasn’t there.

“Your rule, not mine.”

I chewed my lip. “Maybe just this once. After all, Vee likes you. And you actually have the stamina to keep dancing with her. I mean, this is a good thing, right?”

He nudged my leg. “Quit rationalising and get out of here already.”

To my surprise, I sighed with relief. “Thanks, Dante. I owe you.”

“You can pay me back tomorrow. We need to finish our conversation.”

And, just like that, any benevolent feelings washed away. Once again Dante was the thorn in my foot, relentless in his pestering. “If anything happens to Vee, I’m holding you personally responsible.”

On that note, I left.

It was a cloudless night, the moon a haunting blue against the black of night. As I walked to my car, the music from the Devil’s Handbag echoed like a distant rumble. I inhaled the chilly October air. Already my headache ebbed.

My cell phone rang.

“How was girls’ night out?” Patch asked.

“If Vee had her way, we’d be here all night.” I stepped out of my shoes and slung them on my finger, choosing to walk barefoot. “All I can think about is bed.”

“We’re sharing the same thought.”

"You're thinking about bed too?"

"I'm thinking about *you* in *my* bed."

My stomach did one of those flutter things. I'd stayed the night at Patch's place for the first time last night and, while the attraction and temptation had definitely been there, we'd managed to sleep in different rooms. I wasn't sure how far I wanted to take our relationship, but instinct told me Patch wasn't quite so indecisive. "My mom's waiting up," I said. "Bad timing." Speaking of bad timing, I unwillingly recalled my most recent conversation with Dante. "Can we meet tomorrow? We need to talk."

"That doesn't sound good."

I smacked a kiss into the phone. "I missed you tonight."

"The night's not over. After I finish up here, I could swing by your place. Leave your bedroom window unlocked."

"What are you working on?"

"Surveillance."

I frowned. "Sounds vague."

"My target's on the move. I have to roll," he said. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

And he hung up.

I padded down the sidewalk, wondering who Patch was keeping an eye on, and why – the whole thing sounded a little ominous - when my car, a white 1984 Volkswagen Cabriolet, came into view. I threw my shoes in the backseat and dropped behind the wheel. I stuck the key in the ignition, but the engine didn't roll over. It repeatedly made a strained, chugging sound, and I took the opportunity to think a few choice and inventive words at the worthless piece of scrap metal.

The car had fallen into my lap as a donation from Scott Parnell and had given me more hours of grief than actual miles on the road. I hopped out of the car and propped the hood, glaring speculatively at the greasy labyrinth of hoses and containers. I'd already dealt with the alternator, the carburettor, and the spark plugs. What was left?

"Car trouble?"

I flipped around, surprised by the sound of a man's voice behind me. I hadn't heard anyone approach. More perplexing, I hadn't sensed him.

"It would appear so," I said.

"Need some help?"

"Pretty much I just need a new car."

He smiled. "Not sure I can help there, but I am good for one free lift to your destination of choice."

I kept my distance, my mind spinning wildly as I tried to place him. Instinct told me he wasn't human. Nor was he Nephilim. Funny thing was, I didn't think he was a fallen angel either. He had a round, cherubic face topped with a thatch of yellow-blond hair, and Dumbo ears that stuck out slightly. He looked so harmless, in fact, that it made me instantly suspicious. Instantly uneasy.

"Thanks for the offer, but I already gave Triple A a call. They said they'd have a guy out here in no time."

His smile changed momentarily, adopting a cold smirk. "You're getting good at lying, Nora. Guess that boyfriend of yours is rubbing off."

My heart beat faster. "I'm sorry, do we know each other?"

"It's my job to know your boyfriend inside and out, up and down. Where he's going,

what he's doing . . . who he's kissing." He winked, but there was something undeniably snakelike about it.

A panicky thought seized me. What if he was Nephilim and I couldn't detect it? What if he really did know about me and Patch? What if he'd found me tonight to get a message across - that Nephilim and fallen angels didn't mix? I was a brand-new Nephil, no match for him if it came to physical force.

"You have the wrong girl," I told him. "I don't have a boyfriend." Then I turned, trying to stay calm as I walked back toward the Devil's Handbag.

"Tell Patch I want a word with him," the man called after me. "Tell him if he doesn't come out of hiding, I'll smoke him out. I'll burn down the whole of Delphic Amusement Park if that's what it takes."

I glanced over my shoulder warily. I didn't know what Patch had got himself mixed up in, but I had an uncomfortable feeling swelling in my stomach. Whoever this man was, cherubic features aside, he meant business.

The man bent over the Volkswagen, tweaking a few hoses with expert fingers. "Good as new," he announced, brushing his hands clean. "This could be the start of a great partnership, Nora. I help you, you help me."

I watched him stroll away, blending into the shadows, whistling a tune that sent a jitter down my spine.